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The Papal Shooting: Moscow's Role

The opening shots of the papal assassination hearings in Rome set some limits on what has been an unbounded universe of suspicion.

The strong probability is that the assassin is a weirdo from the far right. The Russians may have played a role through the Bulgarian connection. But if so, they probably acted only within a sharply defined window of time.

Before the current round of testimony began, conspiracy theories ran riot. To consider plausibility was to invite attack as a communist dupe. In those conditions, there evolved a view of total Soviet guilt.

The plot was supposedly set in motion on the accession of John Paul II in 1978. Mehmet Ali Agca was picked for the assassin's job and trained for years by communist secret police officials ultimately responsible to the KGB in Moscow. Agca's right-wing connections were written off as disinformation—designed to obscure the communist source.

But in the first days of the current hearings two points emerged with clarity. First, Agca defined himself more sharply. He told the court: "I am Jesus Christ. It's true. I announce the end of the world. Everyone will be destroyed."

Theorists of elaborate conspiracy still see in that pronouncement a signal to co-conspirators. But some close students of the affair—notably the Turkish journalist Ugur Mumcu—have long put down Agca as a "megalomaniac." His recent outburst lends weight to that view. Thus Robert Kupperman, an American student of terrorism not prone to discount conspiracies, acknowledged the other day that Agca was a "psychopath."

The second bit of evidence came from Omar Bagci, the Turk who smuggled into Italy the gun Agca used for the attempted murder. On the stand, Bagci acknowledged that he brought in the gun—though not that he had foreknowledge of a plot against the pope. He also named three other Turks whom he associated with Agca. All three were members of the same right-wing organization. They had ties to Bulgaria through a smuggling operation (guns for drugs) which the gangster state managed in cooperation with a Turkish combine that linked right-wing activities and crime.

The systematic role played by Turkish right-wingers is thus confirmed. They did work with Agca, and it is now harder to take seriously the claims that he was deliberately given a right-wing profile to disguise the communist role in the assassination plot. They were all involved in smuggling. It thus becomes legitimate to look, in a reasoned way, at the exact circumstances that drew Agca and the Bulgarians together.

The odds are strong that, at the beginning at least, Agca was not employed to murder John Paul. Agca reached Sofia in or slightly before July, 1980. At that time the Bulgarians had two uses for a hit man of their own. One was for patrolling the drug traffic through Western Europe. A second was as a tool of revenge on Bulgarians who deserted the secret police. So there is reason to believe Agca started out as a terrorist working for the Bulgarian-Turkish connection.

According to Agca, he began working in the papal assassination plot in July 1980. But that date has some problems when set against the background of Russian-Polish relations. The election of John Paul II as pope in 1978 would not have jolted the Russians so much. After all, Moscow had worked with many Polish clerics, including the pope in his previous role as archbishop of Cracow. Matters got truly hot in Poland only when the independent trade union movement, Solidarity, was recognized in August 1980.

Even then all signs were that the Russians could manage Solidarity and its leader, Lech Walesa, through the communist party machine in Poland. But early in 1981, the party organization fell apart on the issue of Solidarity. The party secretary, Stanislaus Kania, was prepared to use force against the workers. But the defense minister, Wojciech Jaruzelski, refused. In January 1981 Jaruzelski took over as prime minister, and by March he had consolidated his power.

At that point the Russians did face an agonizing choice. For Jaruzelski and the Polish army were clearly working in cooperation with the Catholic Church to avoid confrontation with Solidarity. If Russian troops moved in, they would have to shoot their way, fighting a formidable combination that included the church, the army and Solidarity. In those conditions, and in those conditions almost alone, assassination, with its huge risks, made sense. So it is plausible that between January and May 13, 1981, when the attempt was made, the Russians wanted to kill the pope.

Whether Moscow actually commissioned the deed, we may never know. But a better sense of what happened does have a bearing on the tone of public debate in this country. For in the past few years balanced analysis has been on the defensive. Ghosts and bombast have dominated the political dialogue.

Several signs show a return to rational calculation. It would be a special blessing to see reason applied to discussion of terrorism—a field where the rule has been mindlessness.